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NATIONAL OCEANIC & ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION • US DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

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AMERICANS TOLD TO EAT SEAFOOD TWICE PER WEEK FOR OPTIMAL HEALTH; Pregnant, Nursing Women Advised to Increase Fish Intake but Avoid Five Species, Whale Meat

Backed by compelling science that links seafood consumption to reduced risk of disease, the U.S. government this week is recommending that all Americans – especially pregnant & nursing women and children – eat two seafood meals per week that are rich in omega-3 fatty acids. This recommendation is included in USDA's 2005 dietary guidelines and is being reiterated by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Researchers and medical professionals presented evidence linking the important relationship between seafood and health this week during an international science conference in Washington, D.C. The governments of the United States, Norway, Canada, and Iceland sponsored the conference, with technical assistance from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

"This conference provided us with the opportunity to bring experts together to discuss the important issue of seafood & health, and we learned about many compelling reasons why we should eat two seafood meals per week," said Bill Hogarth, director of NOAA Fisheries Service. "During the conference, scientists and medical professionals told us that the nutrients found in seafood help reduce risk of death by heart attack and prevent a host of chronic health problems and terminal illnesses."

By eating the right kinds of seafood, pregnant and nursing women pass to their baby important nutrients that aid in brain development and may lessen the effects of dyslexia, autism, hyperactivity and attention deficit disorder, according to scientists presenting at the conference. Studies also have presented a link between these nutrients and increased intelligence in infants and young children. Species that are rich in these nutrients – omega-3 fatty acids, iodine, iron and choline – include wild and farmed salmon, shrimp, pollock, cod, canned light tuna and catfish.

Women will not put their baby at risk if they avoid eating shark, swordfish, tilefish, king mackerel, tuna steaks and whale meat until after they have delivered and stopped breast feeding, scientists said. Exposure to mercury found in those species during the sensitive stages of fetal brain development may cause neurological damage. As an extra precaution, women who plan to become pregnant should avoid those species for six months before conception. These are conservative guidelines, with a 10-fold safety margin built in for precaution.

Scientists reiterated that there is no evidence of health risk to the rest of the population, including children and the elderly, from eating seafood. To the contrary, studies have shown seafood consumption to help people live longer, healthier lives. Seafood cuts the risk for heart disease, cancer, Alzheimer's, stroke, diabetes, and inflammatory diseases such as rheumatoid arthritis.

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Further, studies show that nutrients found in fish and shellfish help the body heal after cancer treatments, and ward off auto-immune conditions, allergies, asthma, migraines, skin conditions, and Crohn's disease. Studies have found that people with omega-3 fatty acid deficiencies are at greater risk for sleep problems, depression, stress, schizophrenia and aggressive behavior.

Mercury is a naturally occurring element that has always been present in the environment as well as in many foods. Emerging science presented this week indicates that the high amount of selenium present in ocean fish neutralizes the toxic effects of mercury in the human body. This provides a possible explanation for why there has never been a documented epidemic of child developmental problems in coastal populations whose diets have been comprised mainly of seafood for generations.

Long-term mercury studies on coastal communities in Norway, Africa, Japan and New Zealand have found the children to be born with normal brain function. Citizens of the Seychelles off the East coast of Africa eat fish up to 12 times per week.

Research also shows that more nutrients are retained in fish that is baked or broiled, rather than processed and/or fried. To protect against viral and germ contamination, handle uncooked seafood with care and properly cook fish or shellfish, as you would any meat or poultry.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, seafood has been the fastest growing sector of food production worldwide for decades and is the most internationally traded food. Seafood provides the world with six percent of its protein and is the most significant source of protein in the developing world. Half a billion people worldwide depend on fish as their primary source of proteins. More than 80 percent of capture fish employment worldwide is in Asia, and aquaculture provides 52 percent of all fish production worldwide.

The United States imports about 80 percent of its seafood, of which 40 percent by value is farmed. Overfished species in ocean waters off the United States are rebuilding, and the Bush Administration has developed legislation to allow for aquaculture expansion in this country to decrease our dependence on seafood imports and ensure seafood availability and food production jobs for Americans.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration hosted the conference. Participants included officials from several U.S. government agencies that study and regulate environment and human health issues, such as the Food and Drug Administration, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Health and Human Services, and the National Institutes of Health.

Research presenters included scientists from the National Academies of Science, the American Dietetic Association, American Institute for Cancer Research, the International Food Information Council, the Institute of Food Technologists, and the American Heart Association, in addition to scholars from universities throughout the world in rheumatology, brain chemistry, nutrition, toxicology, biochemistry, women's health, medicine, risk governance, epidemiology, and molecular bioscience.

The Royal Norwegian government has announced its intent to host the next international conference on seafood and health in 2008.